

April 14, 2003

TO: Supervisor Yvonne Brathwaite Burke, Chair
Supervisor Gloria Molina
Supervisor Zev Yaroslavsky
Supervisor Don Knabe
Supervisor Michael D. Antonovich

FROM: Marcia Mayeda, Director

The Saturday, April 12 edition of the *San Gabriel Valley Tribune* published an article regarding the animal license canvassing activities of this department. This memo is intended to provide you with the correct information and to outline this department's actions in response to the article and its erroneous allegations.

Response to Allegations

For nearly 15 years, this department has maintained an expected minimum work standard for license canvassers – the employees who go door-to-door renewing expired pet licenses and issuing new licenses. The work standard is necessary because these employees work independently with little or no direct supervision. The work standard is a department measurement to hold canvassers accountable for their performance.

Before a work standard was established, many employees took advantage of their autonomous work status and engaged in personal activities on County time. As a result, animal licenses were not renewed nor enforced, and the County's trust in these employees was abused. The purposes of animal licensing are to protect public health from rabies exposure, help lost animals get reunited with their owners, and generate revenue for the department to offset demands on the general fund. At that time, none of these objectives were being met.

During the last budget crisis and prior to the development of the work standard, the department faced laying off all the canvasser positions since they were a financial drain on the department. However, the department and the union reached an agreement that the positions could be retained if they could generate more revenue than they cost the department. The union and the department agreed to the implementation of a minimum work standard to save these positions from being cut.

When I joined this department in July of 2001, I was advised that some employees had sent a petition in April of that year to at least one Supervisor regarding their dissatisfaction with the work standard, and some other issues regarding how they were managed. Soon after, I conducted an anonymous morale survey of all staff to determine their issues and concerns. Several themes arose from the canvasser's responses. I then held group meetings with all canvassers and spent time in the field with them to observe their work.

I also discussed these concerns with other staff to learn more about the history and reasons for the canvassers' concerns.

These concerns, outlined in Saturday's article, were resolved approximately one year ago. These concerns, and my responses, were:

1. Dissatisfaction With the Work Standard. At the time, the work standard was 75 licenses per week. Thirteen year's of strong licensing efforts led to a larger percentage of the pet-owning population adhering to licensing policies. Therefore, I reduced the minimum work standard to 70 licenses per week. Moreover, cat licenses were only given half credit towards a license because they cost less and therefore generated less revenue for the department. As a result, I directed that cat licenses would count equally as dog licenses further reducing the minimum standard. While this did have a negative financial impact (that we have absorbed through cost-cutting measures), I felt that it was the ethically-responsible thing to do. Cats are more common and likely vectors for rabies than dogs, and should be given equal protection under licensing provisions. Also, by allowing cat licenses to count equally as dog licenses towards the work standard, many canvassers expressed great relief in meeting the standard.
2. Poor Treatment by their Supervisor: After investigating the canvassers' concerns in this matter I determined that their complaints were valid. As a result, I changed their reporting relationships and reassigned them to work out of our shelters rather than as a stand-alone unit under the previous supervisor with whom they had problems. The canvassers were very satisfied with this response. This reassignment had other benefits of providing greater customer service by creating community-based licensing programs. This change began last April and was fully implemented last July. Our customer service complaints regarding canvassing have dropped significantly since this change.
3. Unfair Actions Towards Pet Owners: The newspaper reporter wrote that pet owners were overcharged up to ten times the cost of a license. This is a misrepresentation. When pet owners are charged more than their annual pet license, it is for past-due licenses for failing to license their animals in previous years. This is similar to fines issued by the DMV for failing to pay annual vehicle registrations and these charges are required under County code. When I initially met with the canvassers, it was stated that some canvassers had penalized pet owners for many past years of unpaid licenses, up to 10 years in at least one case. I immediately told them I would not allow this.

Although the County code does permit collecting past due licenses without limit, I believe the spirit of that law was not to be overly harsh and punitive against pet owners. I told them that they may not charge more than three years' of back licenses and only one penalty. The three-year limit was chosen because rabies vaccinations have a three-year duration, and the penalty amount would be enough to encourage pet owners to maintain current licenses without being excessively burdensome.

4. Hiring and Termination Practices: Since I made the changes to the program in April of 2002, turnover rate of canvassers has significantly declined from 49% to 10.6%.
5. Harsh Measurement Practices: The article suggested that if canvassers don't meet a week's work standard they would be immediately terminated. The newspaper reporter failed to mention that the weekly performance is measured over a rolling six-month time frame. Therefore, if a canvasser has a number of below average weeks they can still recover and meet their performance standard. Canvassers that are failing to meet their work standards are guided and coached by supervisors and top performers so they may improve. Our employees are investments, and we want to see them succeed.
6. Practices by Other Agencies: Comparing Glendora, San Gabriel, and SEAACA to this department's work volume is not a credible comparison. Those agencies are significantly smaller than this department, which is the largest animal care and control agency in the United States. Perhaps these smaller agencies would find it too difficult to average a weekly 70-license collection. However, the millions of pet owners served by this department make this measurement entirely reasonable. Furthermore, the minimum standard was established by an agreement between the department and the canvassers' recognized union
7. Use of the Work Standard: Many positions in this department and other businesses have minimum work standards that employees are expected to follow. UPS and Federal Express drivers must complete each delivery within a maximum amount of time. Telephone sales people must complete each transaction within a certain amount of time. This department's field officers are expected to respond to a certain amount of calls for service each day, and our kennel attendants must have their kennels clean and ready before opening to the public. Immediately upon reducing the minimum standard to 70 pet licenses per week, we met with the union to discuss the change and they had no objections.

The basis for the aforementioned newspaper article was initiated by a department employee currently facing disciplinary action for failure to meet minimum work expectations and his brother, pictured in the article, who was terminated for reasons unrelated to meeting the work standard. The first employee was offered a settlement agreement, but refused it and went to the newspaper instead with false statements and complaints from past practices that have since been resolved. Despite lengthy interviews with my press deputy, and me, the reporter chose to write a biased article and relied on old information -- some of the information from employees who left this department before I was even appointed. The charges in this article are either inaccurate or were addressed a year ago and are no longer valid.

Action by the Department

I am sending a response to the editor of the newspaper to provide the facts and balance that the reporter failed to include in her article. This response is attached.

This department has several checks and balances in place to review the amount of money and penalties collected by canvassers. Since April of 2001, four disciplinary actions were imparted, including termination, for falsification of records. In my letter to the editor of the *San Gabriel Valley Tribune* I encourage any resident who believes they were overcharged to contact my office. I will pursue appropriate corrective action if I discover that any other employees engaged in this practice.

Other Information

In closing, I would like to point out that a strong revenue collection program, such as ours, reduces this department's need for general fund money. In addition, our 50 contract cities rely on the licensing efforts of this department to offset animal control service costs as well as protect the health of their residents. In uncertain budget times as these, such proactive revenue collection efforts offer significant support to threatened budgets.

I hope this memo clarifies the inaccurate or incomplete information in the newspaper article. I will be happy to answer any further questions you may have.

Attachments: April 12, 2003 San Gabriel Valley Tribune article
Department's response to the editor of the San Gabriel Valley Tribune

c: David E. Janssen, CAO
Each Board Office's Chief Deputy
Each Board Office's Animal Control Deputy
Violet Varona-Lukens, Executive Officer